



Mai A Naing

**Location:** Most of the 14,000 Riang Lang people in Myanmar inhabit villages in the same areas as the Riang Lai group in northern Shan State, concentrated in Namsan and Mantong Townships within the Palaung Self-Administered Zone. Scattered Riang Lang communities are also found over a wide area of the state, including approximately 200 miles (324 km) further south in the Langkho District of southern Shan State, not far from the Thailand border. Approximately 2,000 Riang Lang are also located in southwest China’s Yunnan Province.<sup>1</sup>

**Identity:** The Riang Lang and Riang Lai are closely related and can understand each other’s dialect, but they also proudly preserve their own ethnic identities, customs, and clothing styles. The Burmese and Shan have coined nicknames to identify each Riang tribe according to their dress. They call the Riang Lang “Yinnet,” meaning “Black Karen” in Burmese, while the Riang Lai are called “Yinchia,” or “Striped Karen.” In China the Riang Lang are considered part of the official De’ang minority group, which is the Chinese transliteration

of Ta’ang, the self-name of the groups the Burmese call Palaung.

**Language:** Riang Lang, which is part of the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family, enjoys vigorous use in their communities. It is reportedly similar to the Danau language spoken over 200 miles (324 km) further south in the Taunggyi District. The Riang languages were first studied at the start of the 20th century, and a contemporary linguist recently found that the Riang Lang language consists of 12 vowels and 21 consonants.<sup>2</sup> Most Riang Lang people can also speak Shan—the language of the dominant ethnicity in that state.

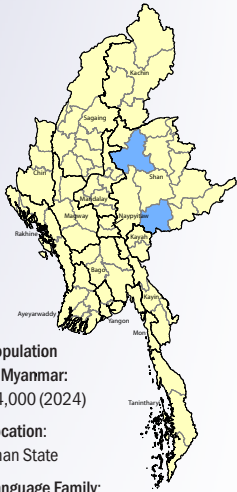
**History:** The 1931 census returned 10,867 “Yanglam” people, assumed to be today’s Riang Lang.<sup>3</sup> The British colonial rulers called Riang people “Black Karen” because of their appearance, but Riang and Karen have no ethnolinguistic connection, with their languages stemming from two different language families.<sup>4</sup> The Riang Lang have been subject to abuse over the years. In 2018 they went viral on social media after

a woman posted a video saying the Riang Lang were “man-eating ghosts with the power to disguise themselves as humans that can only be seen on moonless nights.” Comments by ignorant people included, “Their teeth are black. They eat human flesh.... You won’t see them in the daytime. I’ve lived here for ages, but I have never seen them. I heard bedtime stories when I was young that they are human-eaters.”<sup>5</sup> In a bid to remain anonymous, the shy Riang Lang even considered discarding their traditional dress because of the outcry against them.

**Customs:** The Riang believe that “their first ancestor, Phu Sawti, was hatched from a serpent’s egg—the result of a union between a female serpent-god and a spirit.”<sup>6</sup> Riang Lang women display this belief by their unique appearance. From their early teens, “the women wear 40 or 50 cane hoops apiece, one resting upon another to a depth of a foot around their hips. The undulating movement when they walk resembles a snake’s motion.”<sup>7</sup>

**Religion:** Despite being surrounded by many Buddhist ethnicities, most Riang Lang people have never accepted Buddhism. They remain animists, “believing spirits live in elements of nature and must be placated before peace can be experienced in their communities.”<sup>8</sup>

**Christianity:** British missionaries S. W. Short and his wife interacted with Riang Lang people after they established a mission at Langkho in 1940. Short returned after the Second World War, but all missionaries were expelled from the country in 1962.<sup>9</sup> The Gospel of Mark was produced in Riang Lang in 1950, but the translation proved unusable. A translation of the Riang Lang New Testament is currently in progress. Today there are several hundred Christians scattered among the Riang Lang, but most members of this tribe have never heard about Jesus Christ in a way that enables them to intelligently choose to accept or reject Him.



**Population**  
in Myanmar:  
14,000 (2024)

**Location:**  
Shan State

**Language Family:**  
Austro-Asiatic

**Main Religion:**  
Animism (87.0%)

**Christians:**  
420 (3.0%)

OVERVIEW

**Population:**  
14,000 in Myanmar  
(2024 Joshua Project)  
12,500 (2008 Ethnologue)  
10,867 (1931 census)

**Other Countries:**  
2,000 in China

**Other Names:**  
Black Karen, Black Riang,  
Black Yang, Drum, Reu Yaang,  
Riang Liang, Riag Yang,  
Yanglam, Yang Lang, Yang Wan  
Kun, Yin, Yin Lam, Yin Nat,  
Yin Net, Yinnet

**Location:**  
Shan State: Namsan and  
Mantong Townships in the  
Palaung Self-Administered  
Zone; Langkho District in  
southern Shan State

**Language:** Riang Lang [ril]

**Dialects:** 10

**Scripture:** Portions 1950

**Jesus film:** None

**Global Recordings:**  
Riang Lang #1133

**People ID:** 14554

